

**Khalid refuses to win Bible battle, only to lose war**  
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COMMENT I hypothesised that Khalid Ibrahim is a man who emphasises real work over fireworks. I have also already written at some length about the politics of the Bible seizure issue, but perhaps it is time to re-examine the case and what has developed since then.

Let us briefly go through the religious-political landscape of Malaysia in recent months and years.

There are clearly elements that are trying to turn Malaysia into a religious battleground. Some think that these elements consist of a large group of leaders and grassroots whose motivation is rooted in religious conviction.

I believe, instead, that they are primarily a small group of leaders who use the media as loudspeakers and are motivated by personal ambition and greed.

Those who stoke the flames of religious conflict are very well aware that the various possible endgames of escalation will all work to their favour.

If more and more liberal non-Muslims start to feel increasingly uncomfortable and decide to leave the country, then there are less and less people who will vote against Barisan Nasional, so the extremists will win.

If non-Muslims start to get increasingly angry at the way they are treated and 'fight back' more virulently, this is likely to galvanise more and more Muslims into believing that they are somehow under attack, causing them to support firebrands like Ibrahim Ali or Abdullah Zaik Abdul Rahman (right). Again, the extremists win.

No fighting fire with fire

Khalid is a man who understands that one does not always fight fire with fire. While himself a devout Muslim, he rejects any idea of an exclusive Islam, or an Islam that denies the rights of non-Muslims.

Why then, does he look so weak in handling the Bible seizure issue?

I hypothesised that Khalid not only believes in real work instead of fireworks, but also that he does not believe in shortcut.

Those not in his position have all the luxury of shortcuts, gaining public sympathy by loudly and angrily demanding that Khalid should do more, and act more sternly.

However, instead of caving under that pressure, Khalid has kept his eye on the endgame, and refused to let himself fall into the very obvious traps that are being set.

I have written at length about the hybrid chain of command involved in this case, wherein the Selangor Islamic Addairs Department (Jais) answers to the Selangor Islamic Affairs Council (Mais), which the Sultan of Selangor chairs, and which has defiantly demonstrated its firm belief that it is independent of the state government.

Those who think that it is a simple matter of the state government replacing employees it does not like are clearly unaware of the letter of the law.

Ignoring the bigger picture

DAP politicians like to imply that Khalid should issue some sort of smackdown to Jais, and whip such elements into place. (Oddly enough, no one seems to care that the Penang government took no action against its Penang Islamic Affairs Department or Jaipp either, when Jaipp started snatching bodies from funerals.

Others might be lobby to take a directly confrontational stance with the palace, perhaps thinking up public protests and the like.

However, Khalid is more aware of why the said elements would like nothing more.

As I wrote previously, in the aftermath of such a move, "Utusan Malaysia and their like will have a field day. Imagine the headlines: 'Pakatan defies the monarchy', 'Pakatan fails to defend Islam', 'Pakatan has become the puppet of Christians who want to destroy Islam', and so on and so on."

These headlines will play repeatedly, especially in the rural heartland, which will grow even further beyond Pakatan Rakyat's grasp than it already is.

Putrajaya will remain nothing more than a faded dream, while the likes of Ibrahim Ali and Abdullah Zalik will tell a now growing audience that they have been right all along - that the Christians are out to destroy Islam, and are using Pakatan to do so.

You know this is not true, I know this is not true, but are you confident that when the time comes to vote, everybody who matters will know that this is not true?

Picking the battles

I think seizing the copies of the Bible in the Malay and Iban languages was wrong. I believe that refusing to return them is also wrong. At the same time, I believe in picking our battles.

One of the dangers of communal conflict is how everything invariably becomes a proxy war. At this point, it is obvious that it's not about whether the seized holy books are

returned. I'll bet there are a hundred rich Malaysians who would happily afford to pay for the printing of a hundred times the number of the seized ones.

However, those calling for sterner action see this as a matter of face, and a question of yielding ground. There is the perception, symptomatic of the polarisation of our society, that if we yield an inch here, 'those Muslims' will keep encroaching on more and more of 'our' territory. Ironically enough, it is exactly that attitude which will result in a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Khalid's priorities are different. He understands that it is Putrajaya's inaction and overall attitude of permissiveness throughout the country that is allowing extremist elements to flourish.

There is nothing in the Bible seizure case, and nothing in the whole of Selangor that will stem this tide, if there is no change in Putrajaya.

Until that change comes, Khalid sees it as his responsibility to contain the flames as best as possible, while seeking a just solution.

Battle vs war

Critics may say that Khalid has failed to get the copies of the Bible returned. I think that contention will only be legitimate if Khalid leaves his tenure as menteri besar without having achieved that goal. A goal that has yet to be achieved is not the same as a goal that has failed to be achieved.

In the meantime, there is no point to winning a battle only to lose the war. If we want to really mend religious relations in this country, we must both ensure that the nation remains as intact as possible until we are in a better position to effect change, as well as not sabotage our own efforts to reach that position.

I imagine that some of DAP's biggest backers and financiers have some very strong feelings about religious freedom. If they do not see the trap that is being laid out for them, then it falls to their political champions to explain it to them, not to pander to them.

Just as there are obviously Muslim extremists in this country, there are obviously a few Christian extremists as well. Much as Muslims are often told that there are no Christians proselytising to Muslims in Malaysia, I'm sure many of us believe that is not 100 percent the case.

I'm sure both types of extremists are willing to put in a lot of energy and resources to push their agendas, and this is the sort of thing that politicians love to take advantage of. Statesmen, however, know how to keep their heads above it all, and let themselves be guided by principle, not by lobbyists.

I am reminded of another controversy with a religious bent that Khalid faced. Some time

ago, there was a big fuss over whether Muslim employees could serve alcoholic beverages in Selangor.

Once again, a media frenzy erupted, and once again, the DAP types vented their frustration that Khalid did not take a hard enough stance. Once again, Khalid did not cave to pressure, and instead persisted on his middle ground approach, refusing to feed the flames.

Much like the Kampung Sungai Terentang case, which involved the building of high tension cables through the village in Rawang, in the end the people got what they wanted - minus any fanfare or trumpeting.

Today, no controversy exists any more regarding Muslims serving alcohol in Selangor. While others jumped up and down, Khalid quietly made sure that the best possible solution was being pursued.

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